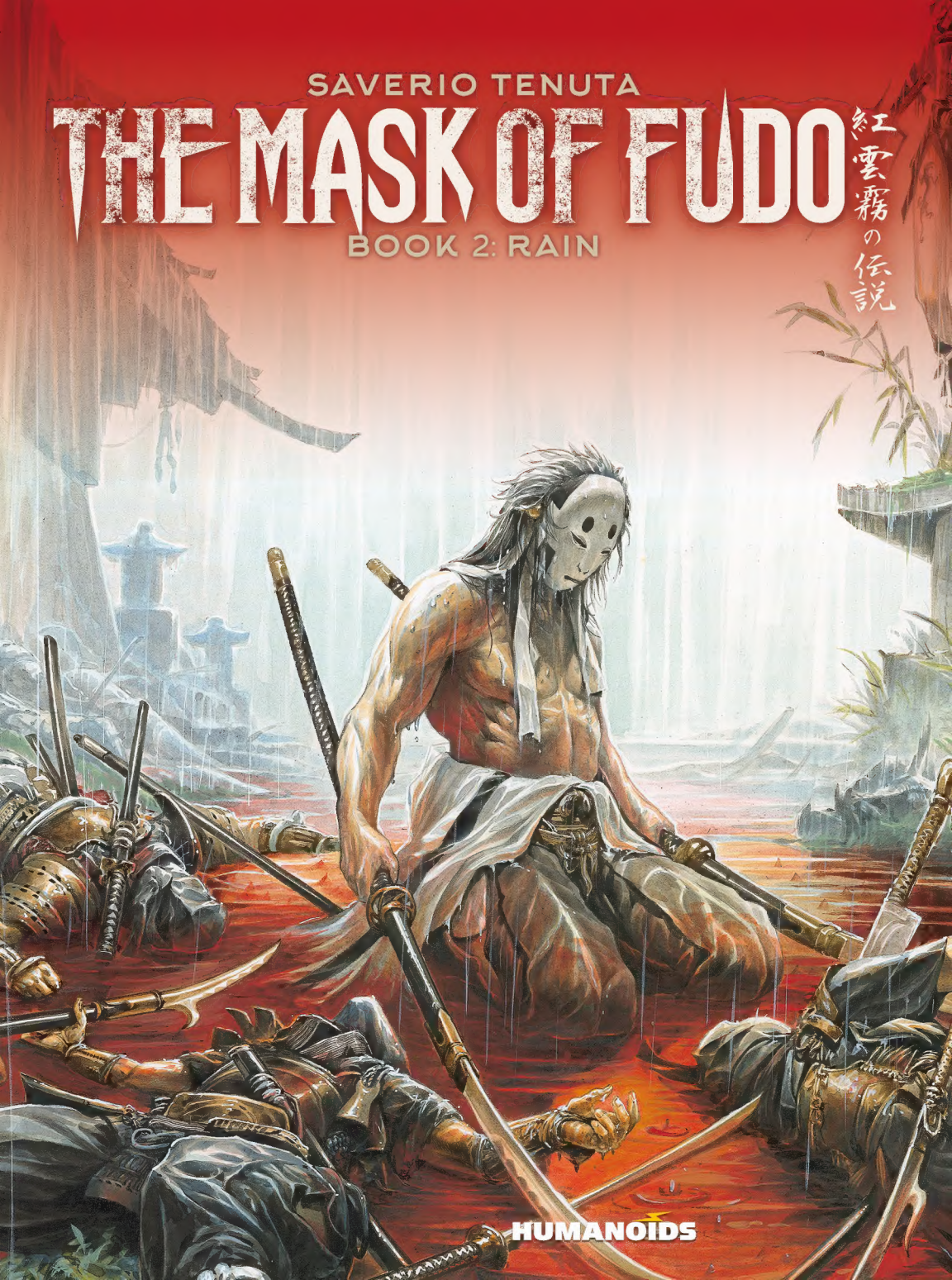
SAVERIO TENUTA

THE MASK OF FUDO

紅雲霧の伝説

BOOK 2: RAIN



HUMANOIDS

SAVERIO TENUTA

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BOOK 1

HUMANOIDS

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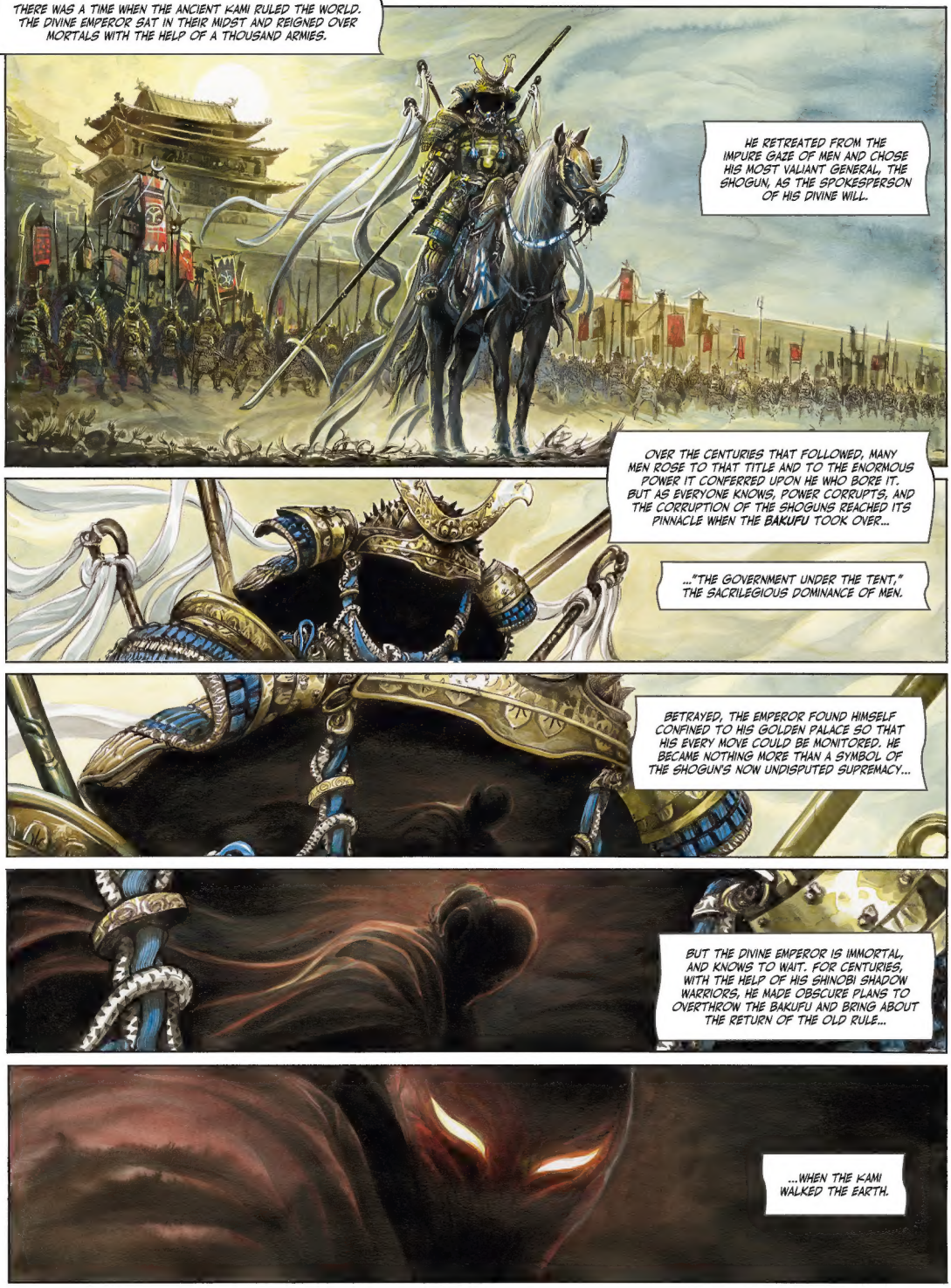
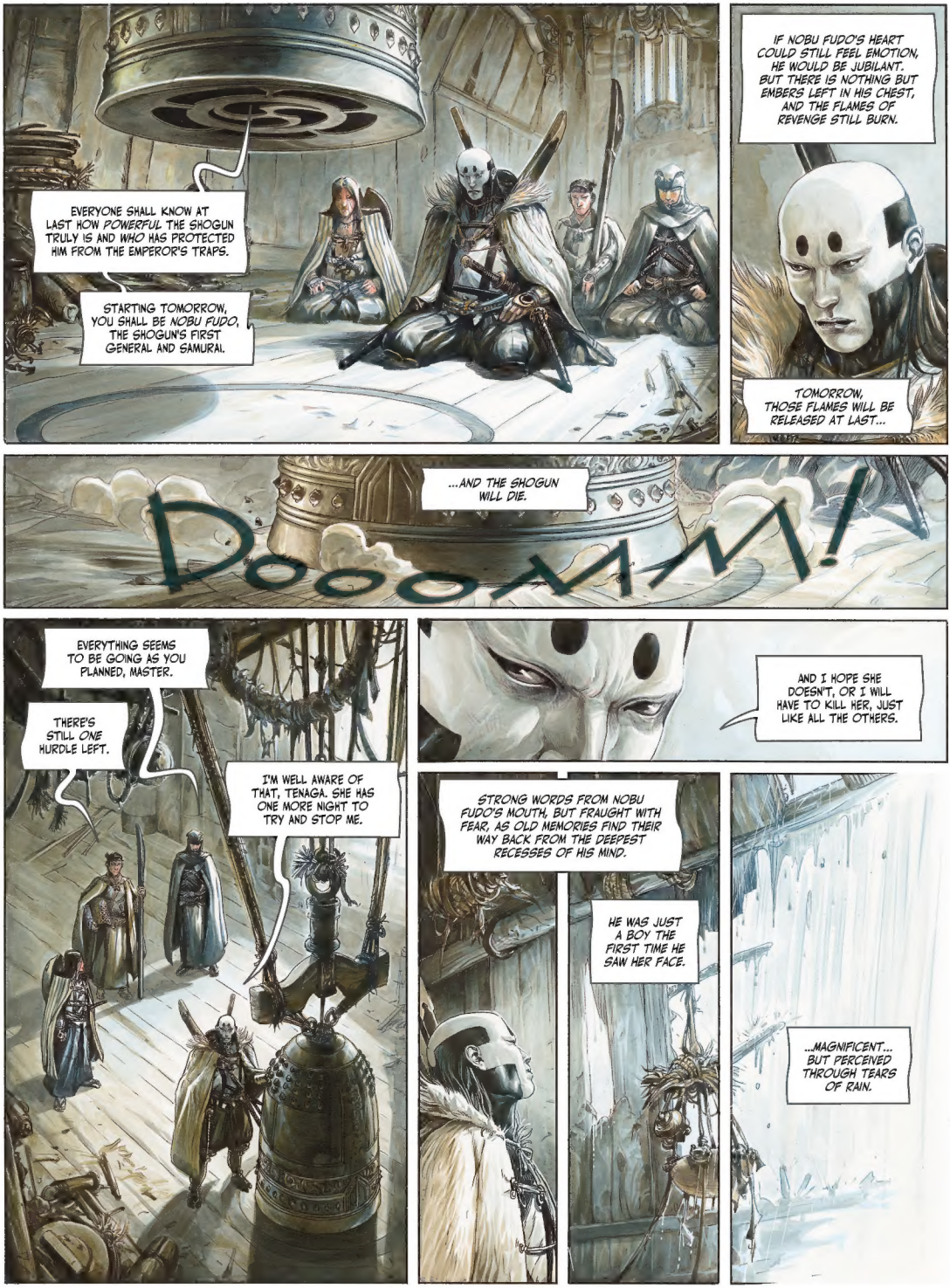

THERE WAS A TIME WHEN THE ANCIENT KAMI RULED THE WORLD. THE DIVINE EMPEROR SAT IN THEIR MIDST AND REIGNED OVER MORTALS WITH THE HELP OF A THOUSAND ARMIES.
HE RETREATED FROM THE IMPURE GAZE OF MEN AND CHOSE HIS MOST VALIANT GENERAL, THE SHOGUN, AS THE SPOKESPERSON OF HIS DIVINE WILL.
OVER THE CENTURIES THAT FOLLOWED, MANY MEN ROSE TO THAT TITLE AND TO THE ENORMOUS POWER IT CONFERRED UPON HE WHO BORE IT. BUT AS EVERYONE KNOWS, POWER CORRUPTS, AND THE CORRUPTION OF THE SHOGUNS REACHED IT'S PINNACLE WHEN THE BAKUFU TOOK OVER...
..."THE GOVERNMENT UNDER THE TENT," THE SACRILEGIOUS DOMINANCE OF MEN.
BETRAYED, THE EMPEROR FOUND HIMSELF CONFINED TO HIS GOLDEN PALACE SO THAT HIS EVERY MOVE COULD BE MONITORED. HE BECAME NOTHING MORE THAN A SYMBOL OF THE SHOGUN'S NOW UNDISPUTED SUPREMACY...
BUT THE DIVINE EMPEROR IS IMMORTAL, AND KNOWS TO WAIT. FOR CENTURIES, WITH THE HELP OF HIS SHINOBI SHADOW WARRIORS, HE MADE OBSCURE PLANS TO OVERTHROW THE BAKUFU AND BRING ABOUT THE RETURN OF THE OLD RULE...
...WHEN THE KAMI WALKED THE EARTH.

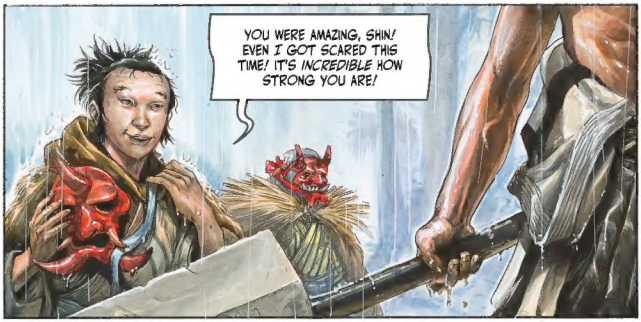
SPRING, YEAR 285 OF THE FUJIWARA BAKUFU - THE SHIRANUI ERA. THRONGS OF PEOPLE FILL THE STREETS, THEIR SONGS RISING UP TOWARDS THE HEAVENLY KAMI. THIS APPEARS TO OFFEND THE GREY, SILENT SKY.
AN ANCIENT WAR IS BEING WAGED IN THE SHADOWS, WHERE IT IS OFTEN CHALLENGING TO SEE THE ENEMY, AND ALL TOO EASY TO COMMIT TREASON.
THE SHOGUN HIMSELF, THOUGH SAFE BEHIND HIS PALACE WALLS, ISSUES ORDERS TO HIS SECRET EMISSARIES BY WAY OF INGENIOUS TRICKS.
FUGIWARA-SAMA, MY LORD AND SHOGUN, KAIZEN MOREBITO HAS MET A DEATH BEFITTING HIS CRIMES, AS ALL THE EMPEROR'S SHINOBI HAVE.
THE DOKUTSU DOJO HAS SERVED ME WELL. YOUR LOYALTY SHALL SOON BE REWARDED.
YOU OWE ME NOTHING, MY LORD. THOUGH I OPERATE IN THE SHADOWS, I LIVE ONLY TO SERVE YOU AND THE BAKUFU.
NOW THAT THE EMPEROR'S LAST PAWN HAS FALLEN, THE TIME HAS COME FOR ME TO TAKE YOUR CLAN OUT OF THE SHADOWS.
YOU SHALL ATTEND MY WEDDING TO AKEMI TORIYAMA IN PERSON, ALONGSIDE THE OTHER DAIMYOS.


EVERYONE SHALL KNOW AT LAST HOW POWERFUL THE SHOGUN TRULY IS AND WHO HAS PROTECTED HIM FROM THE EMPEROR'S TRAPS.
STARTING TOMORROW, YOU SHALL BE NOBU FUDO, THE SHOGUN'S FIRST GENERAL AND SAMURAI.
IF NOBU FUDO'S HEART COULD STILL FEEL EMOTION, HE WOULD BE JUBILANT. BUT THERE IS NOTHING BUT EMBERS LEFT IN HIS CHEST, AND THE FLAMES OF REVENGE STILL BURN.
TOMORROW, THOSE FLAMES WILL BE RELEASED AT LAST...
...AND THE SHOGUN WILL DIE.
DOOOMM!
EVERYTHING SEEMS TO BE GOING AS YOU PLANNED, MASTER.
THERE'S STILL ONE HURDLE LEFT.
I'M WELL AWARE OF THAT, TENAGA. SHE HAS ONE MORE NIGHT TO TRY AND STOP ME.
AND I HOPE SHE DOESN'T, OR I WILL HAVE TO KILL HER, JUST LIKE ALL THE OTHERS.
STRONG WORDS FROM NOBU FUDO'S MOUTH, BUT FRAUGHT WITH FEAR, AS OLD MEMORIES FIND THEIR WAY BACK FROM THE DEEPEST RECESSES OF HIS MIND.
HE WAS JUST A BOY THE FIRST TIME HE SAW HER FACE.
...MAGNIFICENT... BUT PERCEIVED THROUGH TEARS OF RAIN.

SIRE, WE ALL NEED TO DRY OFF AND REST A BIT.
THIS ISN'T THE TIME TO TAKE RISKS.
THESE HININ MUST BE TRANSFERRED AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. YAMASHITA-SAMA HAS ALREADY LOST TOO MANY CONVOYS.
I HEAR THEY WERE SLAUGHTERED BY ONI THAT WANDER FREELY ABOUT THE FOREST.
MERE SUPERSTITION. IT WAS PROBABLY JUST BANDITS.
MAYBE SO, BUT HAVE YOU SEEN THESE TREES? WHAT TERRIBLE FORCE MADE THEM BEND IN SUCH A WAY?
THE FISHERMEN OF OSE BEND THE WOOD AFTER IT'S BEEN SOAKED BY THE RAIN. THEY OFTEN COME HERE TO BUILD THEIR BOATS.
YOU HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR AS LONG AS--
AND WHO MIGHT YOU SAY THAT IS?
HEY! YOU THERE! WHO ARE YOU!? HOW DARE YOU BLOCK OUR PATH!

FORGIVE ME, NOBLE SAMURAI. I AM BUT A POOR FISHERMAN.
I AM JUST HERE, BENDING WOOD FOR MY BOAT.
SNAP!
ARRGH!
IT'S AN AMBUSH!!
THESE WOODS BELONG TO THE ONI!
YAAA!
HAA!
YOU'RE NOTHING BUT WORTHLESS BANDITS! I'LL KILL YOU ALL!
SPOKEN LIKE A TRUE SAMURAI... SO ARROGANT...
...YOU CAN'T EVEN SEE YOU'RE ABOUT TO DIE.
WHAT?? YOU CAN'T BE THAT STRONG!

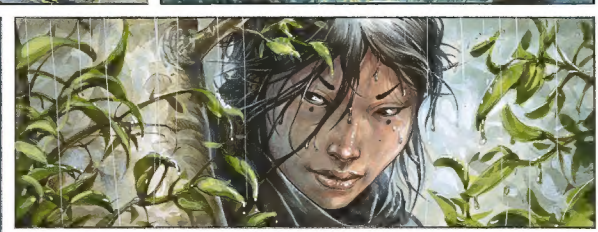
CRYO!
LISTEN UP! THE ONI MEAN YOU NO HARM! WE ARE LOOKING FOR A YOUNG HININ GIRL. HERE NAME IS MIKIKO, OF THE HIRUKOTE CLAN.
WE... WE DON'T KNOW WHO THAT IS.
THE HIRUKOTE CLAN DISAPPEARED YEARS AGO. SHE MUST HAVE BEEN DEPORTED, LIKE THE REST OF US.
ASK THE SLAVE TRADER! HE MIGHT KNOW SOMETHING.
YOU THERE! SCUM! DID YOU HEAR WHAT I JUST SAID? TELL ME WHAT YOU KNOW!
I KNEW IT... *COUGH*...A DEMON...*COUGH*
DON'T EAT ME... I'LL GIVE YOU EVERY-- GHL...
DAMN! HE'S DEAD!
THE HININ ARE RUNNING AWAY!
LET THEM GO. THEY'RE SO PETRIFIED, THEY'LL SAY THEY SAW REAL ONI.

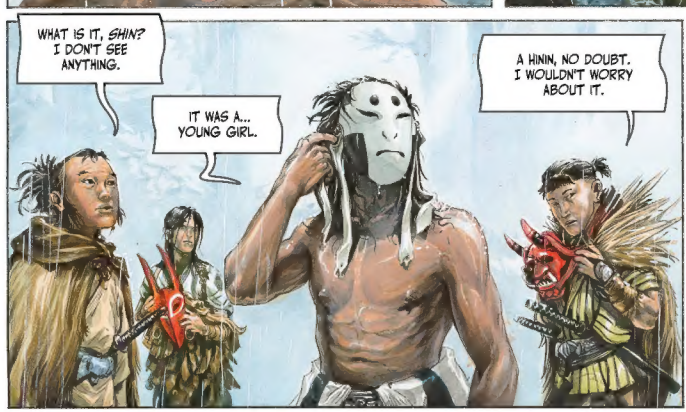

YOU WERE AMAZING, SHIN! EVEN I GOT SCARED THIS TIME! IT'S INCREDIBLE HOW STRONG YOU ARE!

THOSE DAMN BASTARDS! ALL THAT FOR NOTHING! AGAIN!
CRACK

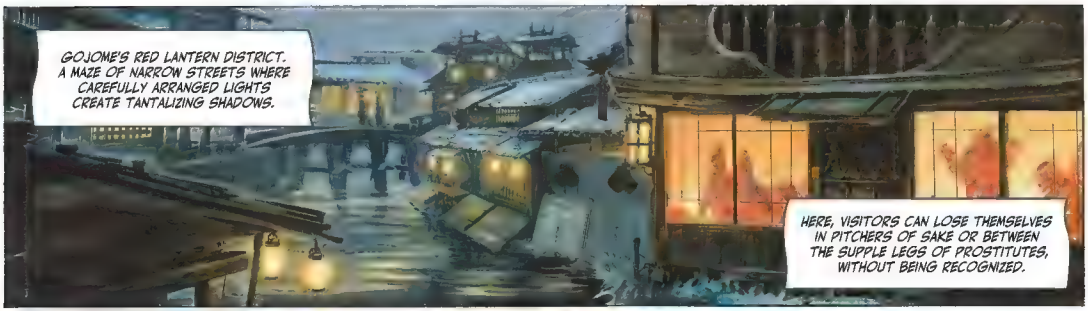
CALM DOWN, SHIN! I'VE NEVER SEEN YOU THIS UNHINGED!
WHAT WERE YOU EXPECTING? AT LEAST WE HAVE THE LOOT!

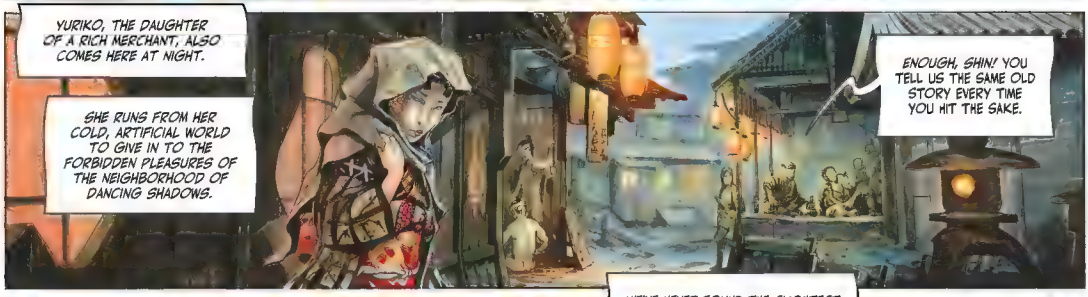
WHO'S THERE?!




WHAT IS IT, SHIN? I DON'T SEE ANYTHING.
IT WAS A... YOUNG GIRL.
A HININ, NO DOUBT. I WOULDN'T WORRY ABOUT IT.

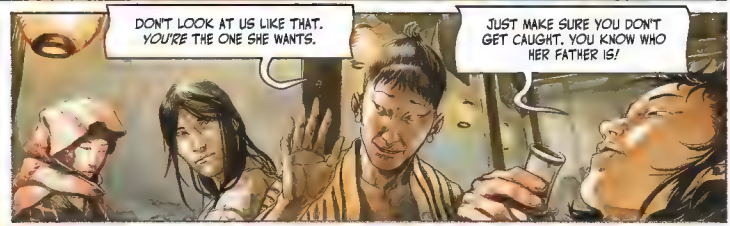
*A HANDMADE DOLL OR TALISMAN THOUGHT TO HAVE MAGICAL POWERS THAT BRING GOOD WEATHER.


GOJOME'S RED LANTERN DISTRICT. A MAZE OF NARROW STREETS WHERE CAREFULLY ARRANGED LIGHTS CREATE TANTALIZING SHADOWS.
HERE, VISITORS CAN LOSE THEMSELVES IN PITCHERS OF SAKE OR BETWEEN THE SUPPLE LEGS OF PROSTITUTES, WITHOUT BEING RECOGNIZED.

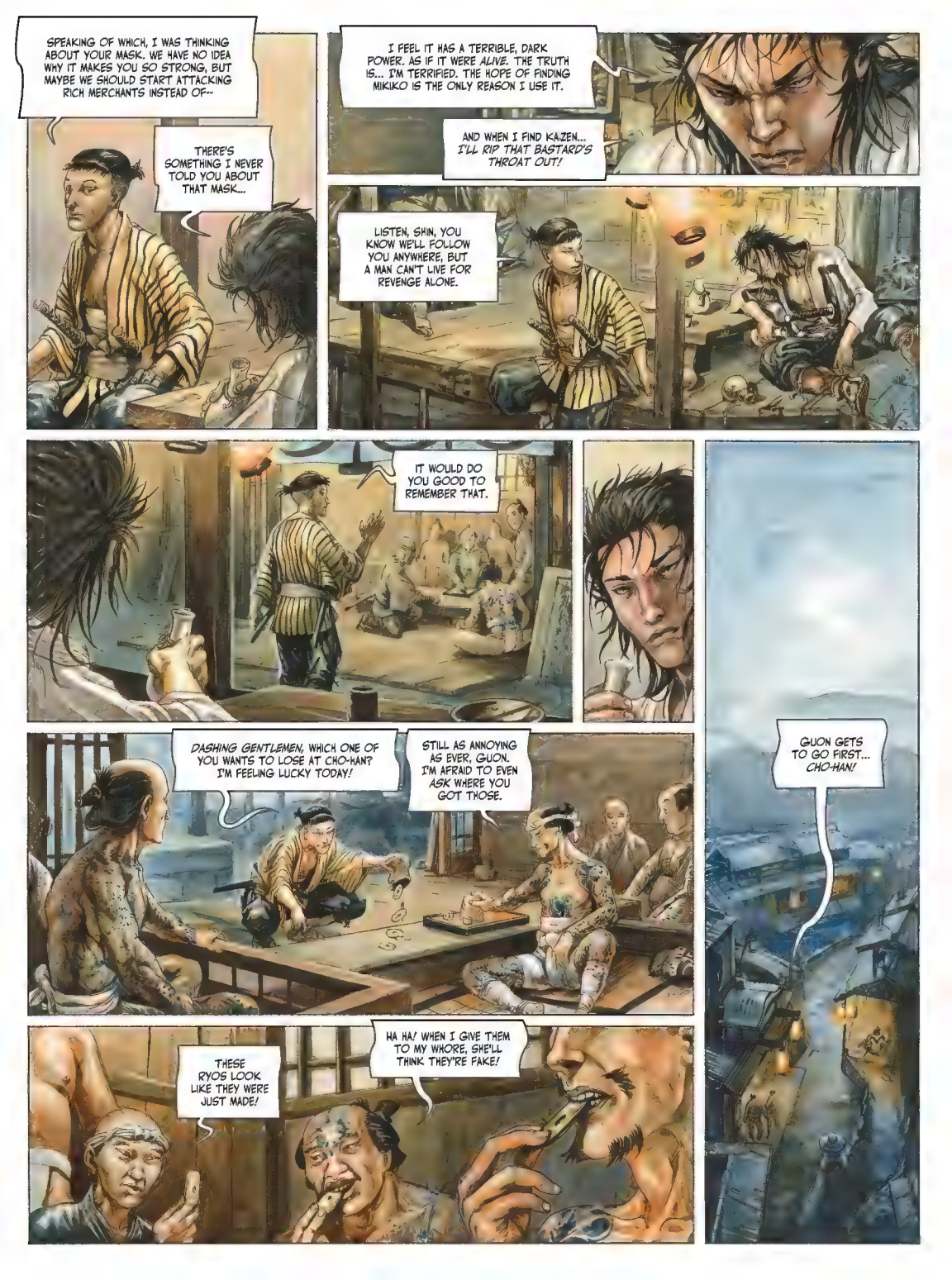

YURIKO, THE DAUGHTER OF A RICH MERCHANT, ALSO COMES HERE AT NIGHT.
SHE RUNS FROM HER COLD, ARTIFICIAL WORLD TO GIVE IN TO THE FORBIDDEN PLEASURES OF THE NEIGHBORHOOD OF DANCING SHADOWS.
ENOUGH, SHIN! YOU TELL US THE SAME OLD STORY EVERY TIME YOU HIT THE SAKE.

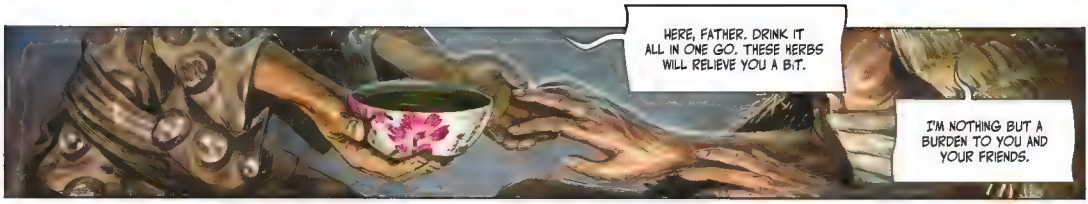
WE'VE NEVER FOUND THE SLIGHTEST LEAD, NOT ONE! AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, MAYBE SHE'S--
DON'T SAY ANOTHER WORD, GUON!

EIJI...

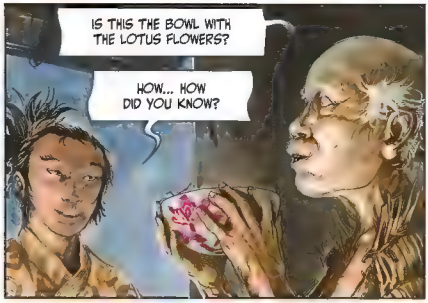

DON'T LOOK AT US LIKE THAT. YOU'RE THE ONE SHE WANTS.
JUST MAKE SURE YOU DON'T GET CAUGHT. YOU KNOW WHO HER FATHER IS!

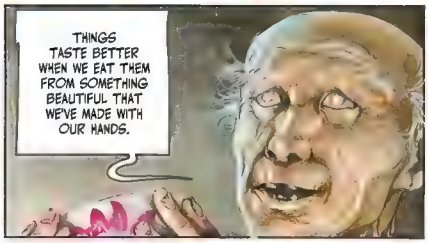
SEE? AT LEAST HE FOUND A WAY TO HAVE SOME FUN. YOU SHOULD QUIT THE SAKE AND DO THE SAME.
DON'T BE SILLY. EIJI'S JUST DOING IT FOR THE MONEY.

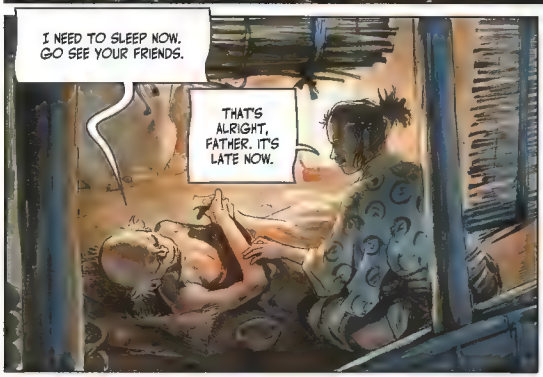

SPEAKING OF WHICH, I WAS THINKING ABOUT YOUR MASK. WE HAVE NO IDEA WHY IT MAKES YOU SO STRONG, BUT MAYBE WE SHOULD START ATTACKING RICH MERCHANTS INSTEAD OF--
THERE'S SOMETHING I NEVER TOLD YOU ABOUT THAT MASK...
I FEEL IT HAS A TERRIBLE, DARK POWER. AS IF IT WERE *ALIVE*. THE TRUTH IS... I'M TERRIFIED. THE HOPE OF FINDING MIKIKO IS THE ONLY REASON I USE IT.
AND WHEN I FIND KAIZEN... *I'LL RIP THAT BASTARD'S THROAT OUT!*
LISTEN, SHIN, YOU KNOW WE'LL FOLLOW YOU ANYWHERE, BUT A MAN CAN'T LIVE FOR REVENGE ALONE.
IT WOULD DO YOU GOOD TO REMEMBER THAT.
DASHING GENTLEMEN, WHICH ONE OF YOU WANTS TO LOSE AT CHO-HAN? I'M FEELING LUCKY TODAY!
STILL AS ANNOYING AS EVER, GUON. I'M AFRAID TO EVEN ASK WHERE YOU GOT THOSE.
THESE RYOS LOOK LIKE THEY WERE JUST MADE!
HA HA! WHEN I GIVE THEM TO MY WHORE, SHE'LL THINK THEY'RE FAKE!
GUON GETS TO GO FIRST... *CHO-HAN!*


HERE, FATHER. DRINK IT ALL IN ONE GO. THESE HERBS WILL RELIEVE YOU A BIT.
I'M NOTHING BUT A BURDEN TO YOU AND YOUR FRIENDS.

DON'T TALK LIKE THAT. YOUR POTS ARE SELLING WELL, AND IT'S THANKS TO *YOU* THAT WE CAN MOVE FORWARD.
AND REMEMBER SHINNOSUKE'S OLD MASK? HE CAN NEVER THANK YOU ENOUGH.


IS THIS THE BOWL WITH THE LOTUS FLOWERS?
HOW... HOW DID YOU KNOW?


THINGS TASTE BETTER WHEN WE EAT THEM FROM SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL THAT WE'VE MADE WITH OUR HANDS.

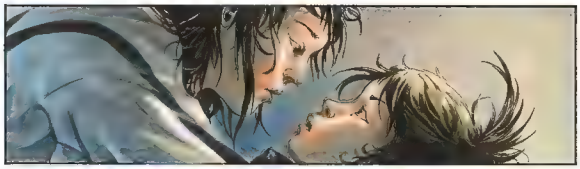

I NEED TO SLEEP NOW. GO SEE YOUR FRIENDS.
THAT'S ALRIGHT, FATHER. IT'S LATE NOW.

YOU KNOW... YOUR TERU TERU BOZU HAS GIVEN US A BEAUTIFUL STARRY NIGHT.

AND THAT'S ENOUGH FOR ME.

...AND THAT ONI... *HIC* I SMASHED HIS HEAD IN WITH HIS HORSE THINGY! *HIC*
THAT'S IT! YOU'RE DRUNK! AND WE'RE SICK OF LISTENING TO YOUR CRAZY STORIES!
HERE, TAKE A BREATH OF FRESH AIR!
OUCH!
HEY! I KNOW YOU! *HIC* YOU WERE THE ONE SPYING ON US IN THE WOODS!
WHAT? YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME? *HIC* TELL THAT TO THE SAMURAI... IN THE WOODS. I'M HIM...
...THE ONI FROM BEFORE, I MEAN... *HIC*
YOU LOOK EXACTLY LIKE THOSE UGLY DEMONS.
I THINK SHINNOSUKE NEEDS TO CLEAR HIS HEAD.
WHAT THE... STOP!
PLASH!
HOW DO YOU KNOW MY NAME?!
TELL ME OR I'LL KILL YOU!

SHIN-CHAN MAY HAVE A PRETTY FACE, BUT WHAT HE REALLY NEEDS RIGHT NOW IS THE POWER OF HIS MASK.
YOU KNOW TOO MUCH! STOP, GIRL! TELL ME WHO YOU ARE!
HA HA! ALRIGHT, THAT'S ENOUGH. KAIDA IS AMUSED BY SHINNOSUKE'S SILLY ANTICS. SHE CAN'T RESIST HIM.
HUMPF!
WUK
BECAUSE OF HIS SILLY ANTICS OR HIS PRETTY FACE?
THE BLUSH IN YOUR CHEEK BETRAYS YOUR DESIRE TO LIE DOWN WITH ME FOR A LITTLE HUMAN WARMTH.
WHAT?! IS SHINNOSUKE STILL DRUNK? KAIDA HAS NO BLUSH ON--
AND I HAVE NO NEED OF A MASK TO THROW YOU TO THE GROUND!
NOW TELL ME WHAT YOU WANT, KAIDA! IF YOU WANTED TO KILL ME, YOU WOULD HAVE FOUND A THOUSAND WAYS TO DO SO BY NOW!



HMPF. SHINNOSUKE LIKES TO PLAY WITH FIRE.

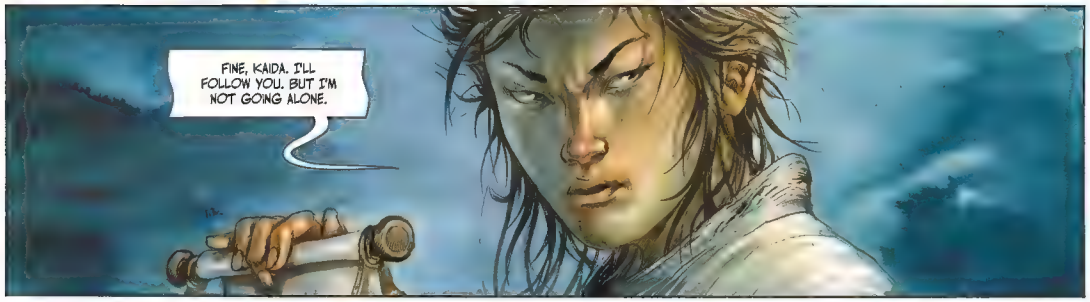
KAIDA HAS COME BY ORDER OF MASTER HOGEN. HE WANTS SHINNOSUKE TO JOIN THE NINJA CLAN OF THE DOKUTSU DOJO.
THAT SECT OF MADMEN? I'M NOT INTERESTED. I'VE GOT BETTER THINGS TO DO.

ALRIGHT. HOGEN EXPECTED AS MUCH, SO HE GAVE KAIDA SOMETHING FOR YOU... SOME STORY ABOUT A BIG TUNA.

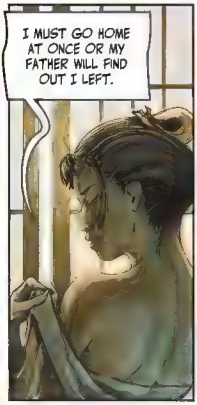
A TUNA? WHAT NONSENSE! TAKE YOUR CRAZY TALK SOME-WHERE ELSE.
KAIDA FINDS IT ODD AS WELL, BUT HOGEN WAS SURE IT WOULD SWAY YOU.

SHINNOSUKE WAS FAMILIAR WITH THAT SYMBOL. IT WAS ON THE NETSUKE HE HAD GIVEN HIS SISTER A LONG TIME AGO. HE REMEMBERED HOW SHE LAUGHED DISBELIEVINGLY AT HIS STORY ABOUT THE GIANT TUNA.
NOBODY ELSE BUT MIKIKO HERSELF COULD POSSIBLY KNOW THAT STORY.

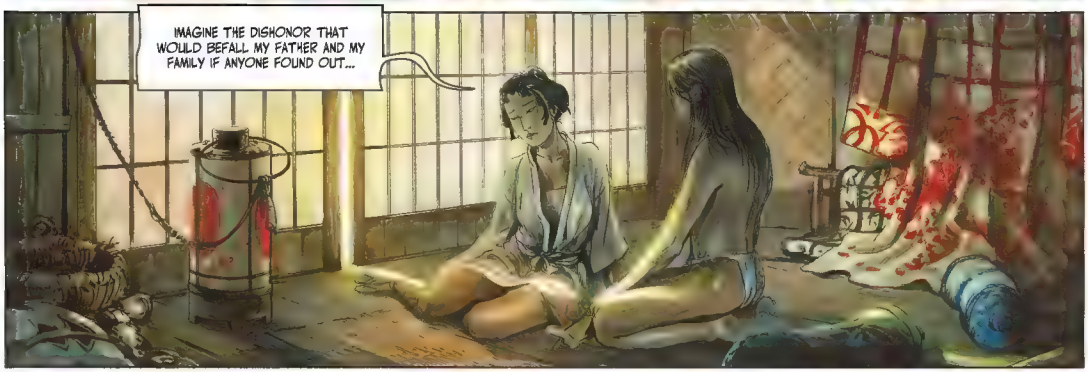
SUCH A SMALL LEAD, AND YET IT WAS THE ONLY ONE SINCE HIS SISTER HAD BEEN TAKEN. SHIN COULDN'T DISMISS IT.

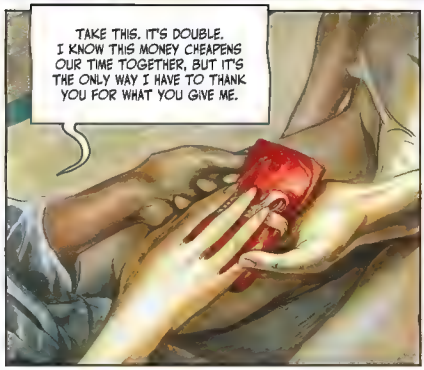

FINE, KAIDA. I'LL FOLLOW YOU. BUT I'M NOT GOING ALONE.

EIJI, WAKE UP. IT'S ALMOST DAWN.


I MUST GO HOME AT ONCE OR MY FATHER WILL FIND OUT I LEFT.

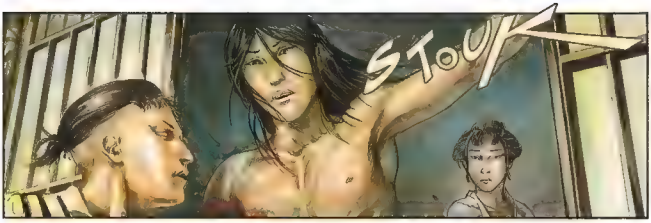
I CAN'T LOOK AT YOU THAT WAY... YOU KNOW THAT.


IMAGINE THE DISHONOR THAT WOULD BEFALL MY FATHER AND MY FAMILY IF ANYONE FOUND OUT...


TAKE THIS. IT'S DOUBLE. I KNOW THIS MONEY CHEAPENS OUR TIME TOGETHER, BUT IT'S THE ONLY WAY I HAVE TO THANK YOU FOR WHAT YOU GIVE ME.

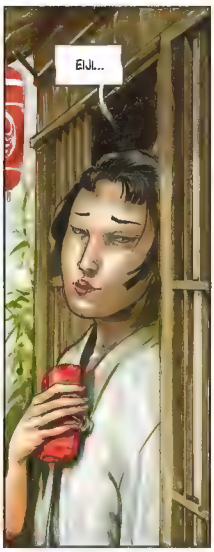
EIJI... ARE YOU IN THERE? I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE! SOMETHING *AMAZING* HAPPENED.
TAP! TAP!

SHIN MET A STRANGE GIRL WHO KNOWS WHERE MIKIKO IS! WE NEED TO LEAVE RIGHT AWAY! THEY'RE WAITING FOR US!


STOUK

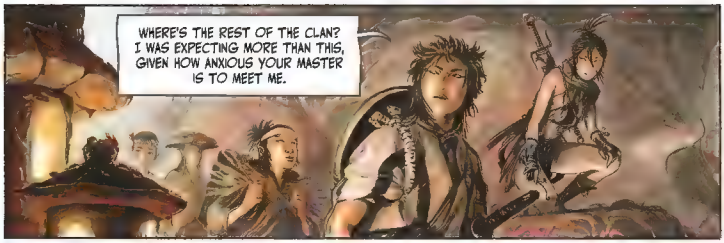
OH, LADY YURIKO... I THOUGHT YOU'D LEFT ALREADY. PLEASE FORGIVE ME.

YOU KNOW, EIJI IS LIKE A BROTHER TO ME... YOU HAVE NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT. YOUR SECRET IS SAFE.


EIJI...

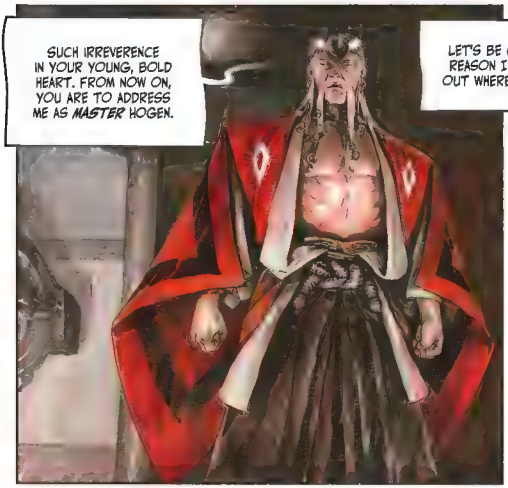
THE RAIN SEEMED LIKE A DISTANT MEMORY ALREADY, AS THEY BEGAN TO WARM UNDER THE EARLY SPRINGTIME SUN.
BUT ITS SWEET WARMTH COULDN'T QUIET SHINNOSUKE'S HEART.
THE IMAGE OF THE NETSUKE WAS BECOMING AN OBSESSION – AS WAS KEEPING UP WITH KAIDA'S FAST PACE.
THERE WAS SOMETHING STRANGE IN THE GIRL'S MOVEMENT...WILD, YET ODDLY NOBLE.
WHAT WAS HER STORY AND WHERE WAS SHE FROM? IT WAS A MYSTERY.
MANY THOUGHTS AND FEW WORDS LATER, THEY REACHED THEIR DESTINATION.
THE GATES TO THE DOKUTSU DOJO, HEADQUARTERS OF MASTER HOGEN'S WARRIOR CLAN.

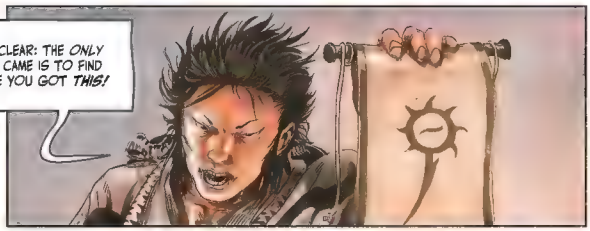
KAIDA HAS ALWAYS THOUGHT THIS PLACE WAS MISSING A *FEMININE TOUCH*. WHAT DO YOU THINK?


WHERE'S THE REST OF THE CLAN? I WAS EXPECTING MORE THAN THIS, GIVEN HOW ANXIOUS YOUR MASTER IS TO MEET ME.

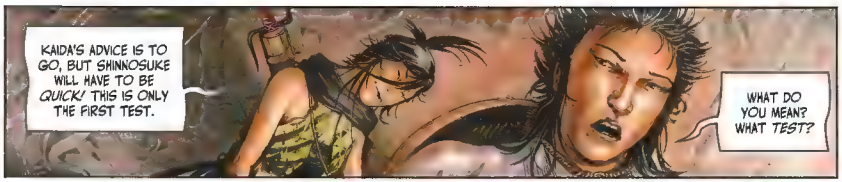
FEAR NOT, IMPATIENT SHIN-CHAN, YOU'LL SOON HAVE THE ANSWERS YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.

HOGEN, I PRESUME. YOUR NINJA TRIBE LOOKS A LITTLE *FLIMSY* AT THE MOMENT.


SUCH IRREVERENCE IN YOUR YOUNG, BOLD HEART. FROM NOW ON, YOU ARE TO ADDRESS ME AS *MASTER* HOGEN.


LET'S BE CLEAR: THE *ONLY* REASON I CAME IS TO FIND OUT WHERE YOU GOT *THIS!*

THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US IS GREAT... YOUR WORDS JUST BARELY REACH ME.
COME *CLOSER*, SO THAT I MAY BETTER HEAR YOUR MUMBLING.


KAIDA'S ADVICE IS TO GO, BUT SHINNOSUKE WILL HAVE TO BE QUICK! THIS IS ONLY THE FIRST TEST.
WHAT DO YOU MEAN? WHAT TEST?

HA HA! TRY TO MAKE IT TO MASTER HOGEN! IF YOU DO, IT WILL BE AT THE COST OF GREAT PAIN!

WE'RE WITH YOU, SHIN!
LET'S SHOW THEM WE DON'T MESS AROUND!

RUN, SHIN-CHAN! RUN!
THIS TIME, NO AMOUNT OF CUNNING OR TRICKERY WOULD HELP THESE FOUR FRIENDS WIN THE BATTLE.

NO BENT TREE BRANCHES, NO ELEMENT OF SURPRISE.

THIS TIME, IT WAS HEAD-ON CONFRONTATION, A CLASHING OF NERVES AND STEEL.

GUON!
ARGH!

ONLY SHINNOSUKE MANAGED TO MAKE HIS WAY FORWARD, BUT IT WASN'T BECAUSE OF THE POWER BESTOWED ON HIM BY THE MASK.
HE WAS DRIVEN BY THE THOUGHT OF MIKIKO.
WHEN SHINNOSUKE DEPLETED ALL THE STRENGTH IN HIS MUSCLES, HE CALLED UPON HIS NERVES.
I'LL KILL YOU ALL, YOU SCUM!!!
AND WHEN HIS NERVES BETRAYED HIM IN TURN, HE CLUNG TO DESPERATION.
HYAAAA!
UNFORTUNATELY... THAT WASN'T ENOUGH EITHER.
REMARKABLE! EVEN KAIDA DIDN'T MAKE IT TO THE THIRD LANTERN THE FIRST TIME SHE SET FOOT IN THIS TEMPLE.
YOU WILL BE A FINE DISCIPLE FOR THE DOKUTSU DOJO.
WHERE DID YOU GET THE DRAWING FOR THIS NETSUKE?! TELL ME, OR I SWEAR I'LL KILL YOU!
THAT WON'T BE NECESSARY, SHINNOSUKE. IT'S ALL HERE, RIGHT BEFORE YOUR EYES. THE PERSON WHO MADE THAT DRAWING IS BEHIND THAT RED DOOR.
YOU ALONE CAN FREE HER FROM HER PRISON BY BECOMING A LOYAL SERVANT TO THE DOKUTSU DOJO.

GET YOUR GRUBBY PAWS OFF MY MASK!
"THIS IS THE MASK OF FUDO-MYO, THE GOD OF IMMOVABLE FIRE! MANY WERE THOSE WHO ATTEMPTED TO WEAR IT TO HARNESS ITS POWER. NONE SURVIVED.
"OVER THE CENTURIES, BELIEF IN IT NEARLY VANISHED AND THE MASK WAS MERELY REVERED AS A RELIC FROM THE PAST...
"... BUT THE FIRE WITHIN IT WAS ONLY SLEEPING. UNMOVING, BUT STILL CRACKLING."
THAT MASK IS ACTUALLY THE WHOLE REASON YOU'RE HERE. ITS ORIGINS DATE BACK TO THE SHINOWA ERA, THE AGE OF THE ANCIENT KAMI.
UNTIL THE DAY YOU CAME ALONG...A CHILD WITH NO IDEA OF THE POWER HE WAS AWAKENING.
SHOW ME YOU'RE WORTHY OF THAT POWER, AND YOU MAY OPEN THE RED DOOR.
A WAR HAS BEEN RAGING FOR CENTURIES AND YOU WILL HELP ME, SHINNOSUKE. MORE THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE.
HAROHARO, SHIN-CHAN. SEE YOU ON THE BATTLEFIELD!
KOUK

"I AM SHINNOSUKE. I WILL DO WHATEVER IT TAKES TO SEE MIKIKO AGAIN.
"I MUST REMIND MYSELF OF THAT, FOR TIME SEEMS TO STAND STILL AND THE DAYS ARE BUT A SERIES OF FLASHES.
"ANCIENT RITUALS ARE CARVING DEEP FURROWS INTO MY FLESH AND THE FLESH OF MY FRIENDS...
"DEEP ENOUGH TO REACH THE KI, AT THE CENTER OF OUR SOULS.
"I AM SHINNOSUKE AND I HAVE BEEN FIGHTING WITHOUT RESPITE FOR DAYS SO THAT MY MUSCLES MAY BECOME ROCK AND MY SINEW STEEL. THE DOKUTSU DOJO MAKES US STRONGER, BUT WE PAY A PRICE IN RETURN.
"THE LAST VESTIGES OF OUR HININ HERITAGE MUST BE ERASED AND MERCY MUST BE BANISHED FROM OUR HEART.
"KAIDA LEAVES US NO WAY OUT. ONLY NOW CAN I SEE THAT BEHIND HER FRAGILE EXTERIOR LURKS A PITILESS SENSEI, DEMON AND EXECUTIONER.
"HER UNPARALLELED ALLURE HAS TAKEN ME OVER AND THREATENS TO HURL MY SOUL INTO A BOTTOMLESS VOID.
"I'M TERRIFIED...FOR I'M BEGINNING TO LONG FOR THE VOID."

"A THOUGHT HAS MADE ITS WAY INTO ALL OUR MINDS: THE NOTION THAT THIS LIFE IS THE ONE WE HAVE ALWAYS WANTED.
"I AM SHINNOSUKE... OR AT LEAST, I THINK I STILL AM."
KIYAA!!
BAF!
TAP!
FSSSS
AAAAHH!!
WOK
MASTER HOGEN, THIS BATTLE IS ENTERTAINING, BUT KAIDA FEELS IT IS NOTHING BUT A WASTE OF MANPOWER...
THE BODY COUNT DOESN'T MATTER. THE TRIAL MUST BE EXTREME.

THE DOKUTSU DOJO SERVES THE SHOGUN AND PROTECTS THE BAKUFU. YOU KNOW HOW *FEROCIOUS* THE EMPEROR'S SHINOBIS ARE.
TISK, TISK, SILLY KAIDA. THE MASTER'S RIGHT. HE IS ALWAYS RIGHT.
ARHH!
YARRRRRR!!
AAAAAHHH!
HA! KAIDA HAS BEEN A GREAT SENSEI! SHE EVEN GOT ENJI TO USE HIS *TONGUE!*
I'M AWARE OF YOUR SKILLS, BUT YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT SHINNOSUKE IS ALL I CARE ABOUT. IF WE MANAGE TO BREAK HIM, THE POWER OF FUDO'S MASK WILL BE OURS AT LAST.

DAMN, SHIN! WE'VE BEEN FIGHTING FOR HOURS. I'M SPENT...

THIS DOESN'T MAKE ANY SENSE! WHY WOULD THEY HAVE TRAINED US THIS HARD ONLY TO KILL US?

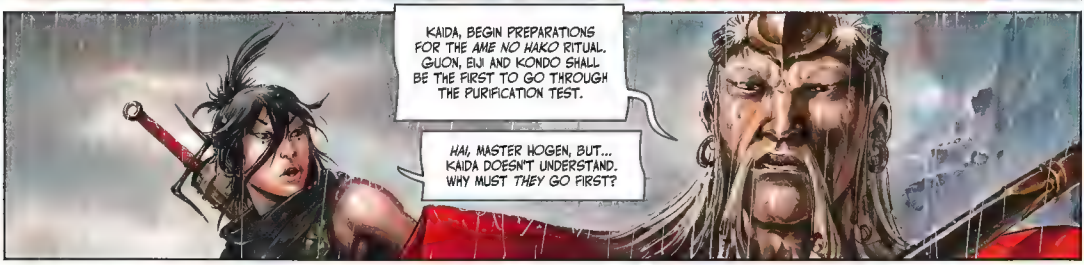
STOP, BROTHERS. I'M THE ONE THEY'RE TESTING. I'LL GO ALL THE WAY, IF THAT'S WHAT HOGEN WANTS, BUT I WON'T LEAVE YOU TO DIE!

COME AND GET ME! VERMIN! COWARDS!

JUST AS I THOUGHT. THOUGH THE BOY WAS CHOSEN BY THE MASK, HE'S STILL TOO ATTACHED TO HIS FRIENDS TO ALLOW IT TO FULLY AWAKEN.

MASTER HOGEN SEEMS DISAPPOINTED. PERHAPS HE FEELS SHINNOSUKE ISN'T READY FOR THE FINAL RITUAL?

WRONG, KAIDA. THAT IS PRECISELY THE TRIAL THAT WILL EXPLOIT SHINNOSUKE'S WEAKNESS TO OUR ADVANTAGE.


KAIDA, BEGIN PREPARATIONS FOR THE *AME NO HAKO* RITUAL. GUON, EIJI AND KONDO SHALL BE THE FIRST TO GO THROUGH THE PURIFICATION TEST.
HAI, MASTER HOGEN, BUT... KAIDA DOESN'T UNDERSTAND. WHY MUST *THEY* GO FIRST?

"I WANT THEM TO BE READY WHEN IT'S SHINNOSUKE'S TURN... FOR HIS LAST TEST WILL BE TO *KILL* HIS FRIENDS.

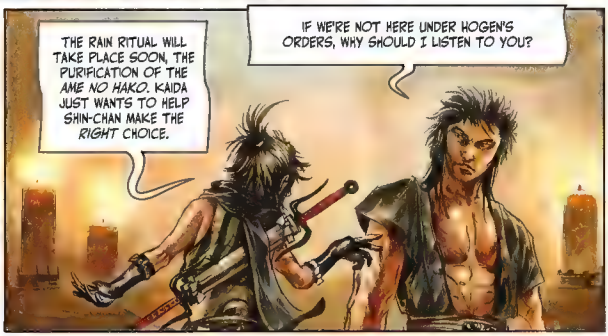
"THE *GUILT* HE'LL FEEL OVER THAT *DESPICABLE* ACT WILL PREPARE HIM TO OPEN THE RED DOOR.

"AND WHEN HE FINDS OUT THE TRUTH, *PAIN* WILL CONSUME HIM FOR *GOOD*.
"THE MASK WILL TAKE HIM OVER...

"...AND THE POWER OF FUDO-MYO WILL BE IN *OUR* HANDS."

KAIDA-SENSEI, DOES MASTER HOGEN KNOW WE'RE HERE?

HOGEN? *PFF!* ALWAYS HOGEN! HASN'T SHIN-CHAN FIGURED OUT YET THAT KAIDA *ISN'T* VERY SUBMISSIVE?


IF WE'RE NOT HERE UNDER HOGEN'S ORDERS, WHY SHOULD I LISTEN TO YOU?
THE RAIN RITUAL WILL TAKE PLACE SOON, THE PURIFICATION OF THE *AME NO HAKO*. KAIDA JUST WANTS TO HELP SHIN-CHAN MAKE THE *RIGHT* CHOICE.

BECAUSE KAIDA *KNOWS* SHIN-CHAN AND SHE WANTS TO SEE HIS EYES *BURN* WITH DESIRE TO KNOW WHAT THE RAIN WILL ASK OF HIM.

SOON, WATER WILL ONCE AGAIN FILL THIS ANCIENT WELL, AND A BOX WILL EMERGE FROM THE DEPTHS.

INSIDE OF IT WILL BE AN OBJECT THAT REPRESENTS SHINNOSUKE'S PAST. THE RAIN WILL ASK HIM TO *SEVER* HIS TIES TO IT WITH *BLOOD*.
I HAVE NO TIES LEFT TO SEVER, KAIDA. I GAVE UP MY PAST LONG AGO.

IS SHIN-CHAN *QUITE SURE* OF THAT? BECAUSE MASTER HOGEN CERTAINLY *ISN'T!*

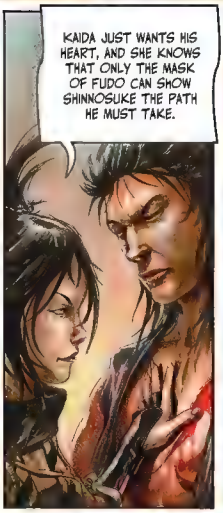
ZASH

TAP!

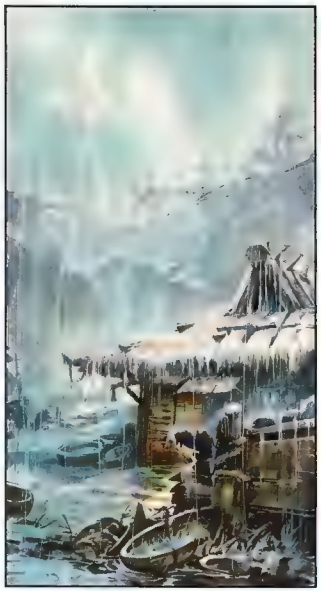
HA! SHIN-CHAN IS A FAST LEARNER.
NOT FAST ENOUGH, I SEE. PERHAPS I SHOULDN'T TRUST MY SENSE! ANYMORE.

OH, BUT IT'S NOT KAIDA YOU SHOULD FEAR. IT IS MASTER HOGEN WHO WILL DECIDE WHICH PAST TO PUT IN THE AME NO HAKO.
ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT MY FRIENDS? I DON'T EVEN WANT TO THINK ABOUT IT. BUT...I'LL DO ANYTHING TO FREE MIKIKO, YOU KNOW THAT.

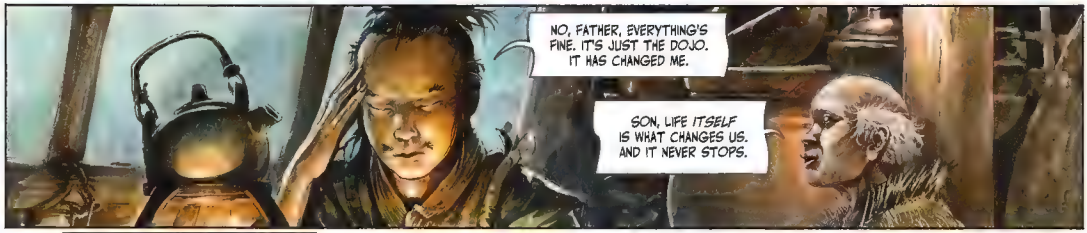
SHIN-CHAN IS SO SWEET, BUT ALSO SO NAIVE THAT HE CAN'T UNDERSTAND THAT HOGEN WILL NEVER GIVE HIM WHAT HE WANTS. HE ONLY WANTS TO CONTROL THE MASK.


KAIDA JUST WANTS HIS HEART, AND SHE KNOWS THAT ONLY THE MASK OF FUDO CAN SHOW SHINNOSUKE THE PATH HE MUST TAKE.

HOGEN CAN NEVER GO AGAINST THE MASK.



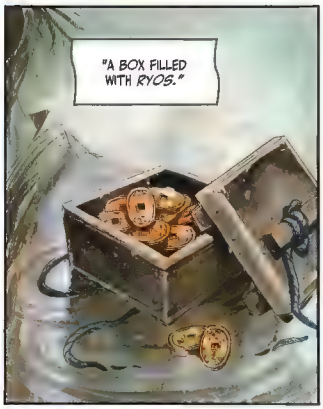
THAT OLD TERU TERU BOZU... WHEN WILL YOU BRING YOURSELF TO THROW IT *OUT*?
WHY ARE YOU SPEAKING THIS WAY, SON? I SENSE *ANGUISH* IN YOUR VOICE. IS SOMETHING WRONG?


NO, FATHER, EVERYTHING'S FINE. IT'S JUST THE DOJO. IT HAS CHANGED ME.
SON, LIFE *ITSELF* IS WHAT CHANGES US. AND IT NEVER STOPS.

LOOK AT ME. THOUGH I AM *BLIND*, I KNOW WHAT I LOOK LIKE. I DON'T WANT THAT TO BE YOUR FUTURE.
JOINING A SWORD DOJO IS A *GREAT HONOR*, ESPECIALLY FOR THE SON OF A HININ.

THE TRUTH, FATHER, IS THAT I'VE HIDDEN MANY THINGS FROM YOU REGARDING THIS DOKUTSU DOJO, AND AFTER THE LATEST EVENTS...I'M NOT SURE I WANT TO GO ON.

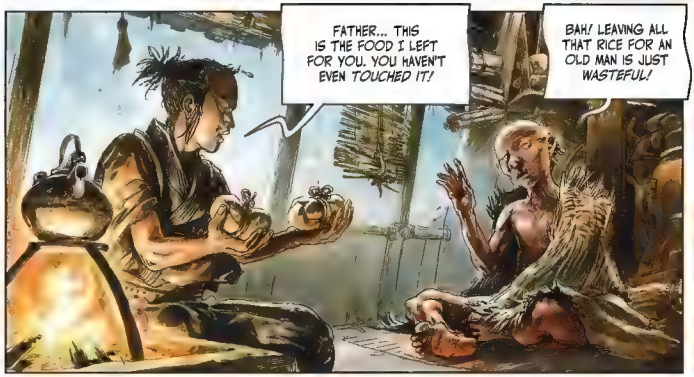
I... I SAW MY FRIENDS. THEIR FACES WERE WHITE AS DEATH. THEY HAD JUST FINISHED THE *AME NO HAKO* RITUAL.
GUON WAS THE FIRST. HE SAID THE RAIN HAD SPOKEN TO HIM THROUGH A BOX...


"A BOX FILLED WITH *RYOS*."

ODDS!
LOOKS LIKE THE FUKUROKUJU KAMI ISN'T ON YOUR SIDE, GUON. ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO KEEP PLAYING?
SHUT UP AND THROW THE DICE, JUROBEI.
IT'S NOT OUR PROBLEM IF HE BET EVERYTHING ON EVEN NUMBERS.
ANOTHER GAME? WHO'S PLAYING?
CHO-HAN!
TUP!
ODDS!
UNBELIEVABLE!
GUON LOSES AGAIN!
HOW CAN YOU LOSE ALL THOSE RYOS AND NOT GET UPSET? I INSIST ON CHECKING THEM!
BE MY GUEST. I HAVE NO OBJECTION. THESE RYOS BELONG TO YOU NOW.
WHAT A STRANGE TASTE. DID YOU STEAL THEM FROM A DAIMYO? LEAVE IT TO THEM TO GIVE MONEY FLAVOR.
I SEASONED THEM MYSELF, ACTUALLY.
I WANTED TO MAKE SURE YOU'D ENJOY THE LAST GOLD YOU'LL EVER GET FROM ME.

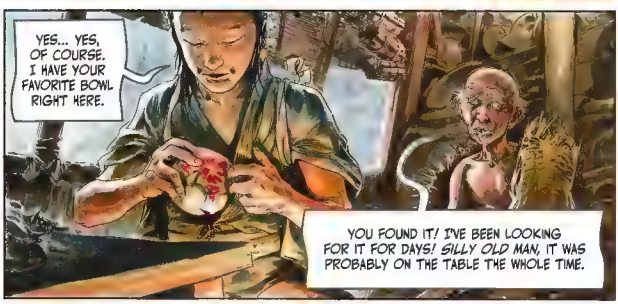
*A BUDDHIST MONK.

RAIN THAT SPEAKS THROUGH A BOX...?
STRANGE WORDS, MY SON. I DON'T BELIEVE I UNDERSTAND.


FATHER... THIS IS THE FOOD I LEFT FOR YOU. YOU HAVEN'T EVEN TOUCHED IT!
BAH! LEAVING ALL THAT RICE FOR AN OLD MAN IS JUST WASTEFUL!

WHY MUST YOU ALWAYS BE SO STUBBORN?!

FORGIVE ME, FATHER. I DIDN'T MEAN TO RAISE MY VOICE.
THERE IS NOTHING TO FORGIVE, SON. I'LL DRINK YOUR REMEDY IN ONE GO IF IT'LL MAKE YOU HAPPY, BUT POUR IT IN MY BOWL WITH THE LOTUS FLOWERS.

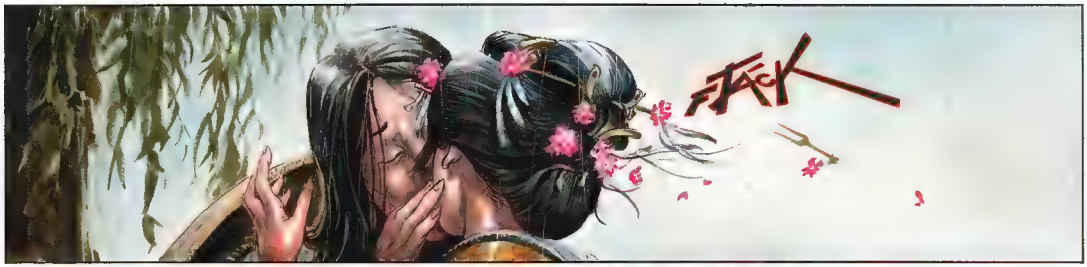

YES... YES, OF COURSE. I HAVE YOUR FAVORITE BOWL RIGHT HERE.
YOU FOUND IT! I'VE BEEN LOOKING FOR IT FOR DAYS! SILLY OLD MAN, IT WAS PROBABLY ON THE TABLE THE WHOLE TIME.

BUT PLEASE, FINISH YOUR STORY. WHAT DID THE OTHERS FIND IN THAT STRANGE RAIN BOX?

EIJI WAS NEXT. HE FOUND A PIECE OF PAPER. I THINK IT WAS A PAGE FROM A PERSONAL DIARY...

"...BUT I COULDN'T SAY WHAT WAS ON IT."

"IN SEVEN DAYS, THE MONTH OF MINAZUKI WILL BE UPON US AND THE NIGHTS SEEM EVEN LONGER WITHOUT THE SOFTNESS OF EIJI'S TOUCH."
"THE LUXURY IN WHICH MY FAMILY LIVES ONLY DEEPENS THE EMPTINESS I FEEL IN MY HEART."
"I'VE TAKEN TO GOING ON LONG WALKS ON THE BANKS OF THE KOIMARU RIVER, EVERY MORNING AT THE SOUND OF THE FIFTH BELL."
"MY FEET ALWAYS TAKE ME TO THE LITTLE HASU BRIDGE WHERE I MET EIJI FOR THE FIRST TIME."
"EACH DAY I WAIT, TREMBLING, HOPING TO SEE HIM APPEAR. I LONG TO TELL HIM MY HEART CAN NO LONGER KEEP QUIET."
"EIJI, MY SWEET, MY LOVE, MY ONLY DESIRE IS TO RUN FAR AWAY WITH YOU."
MY HEART HAS NEVER BEEN FILLED WITH SUCH JOY.
HOLD ME, EIJI, PLEASE. DON'T EVER LEAVE ME AGAIN.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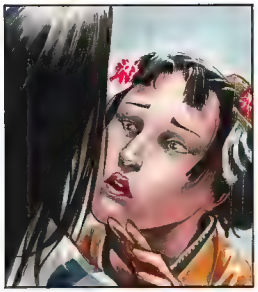
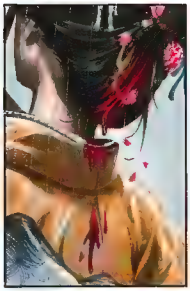
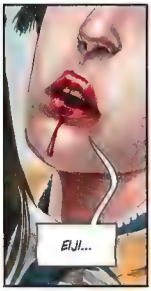
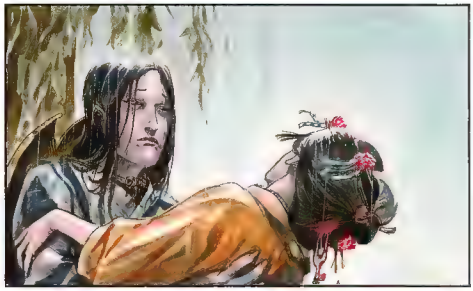





EIJI...



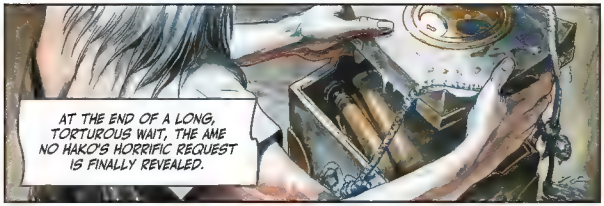
EIJI AND YURIKO... FOREVER.

NOW, I AM... AKASITA.

HERE, FATHER. YOUR POTION.
AH, YES. THIS IS INDEED MY FAVORITE BOWL.
TELL ME THE TRUTH, SON. I MAY BE BLIND, BUT I CAN STILL SEE WHEN I'M BEING LIED TO.
THIS BOWL HASN'T BEEN IN THE HOUSE FOR DAYS... AND YOU STILL HAVEN'T TOLD ME WHAT IT IS *YOU* FOUND INSIDE THAT STRANGE RAIN BOX...
OH, FATHER... WHAT HAVE I DONE?
NOW, NOW, SON. WHAT DO YOU *THINK* YOU'VE DONE? YOU'VE JUST BROUGHT ME BACK MY FAVORITE BOWL. IT WOULD BE A *SHAME* TO TAKE MY LEAVE WITHOUT ALL MY FAVORITE THINGS.
JUST STAY WITH ME ONE LAST TIME. IT'S BEEN RAINING FOR DAYS AND I'M STARTING TO GET COLD.
YES, FATHER, THE WEATHER IS CERTAINLY NOT THE KINDEST. EVEN YOUR TERU TERU BOZU HAS BECOME BLACK WITH DIRT.
SO THAT MEANS... THAT IT'S A *KURO** BOZU FROM NOW ON. HEH HEH, THAT'S FUNNY, ISN'T IT?
YES, FATHER.... *KURUBOZU* IS A NICE NAME.
...THAT'S WHAT WE'LL CALL HIM.

*BLACK.

TEARS FALL RELENTLESSLY FROM THE SKY, POUNDING THE COLD STONE.
LONG TENDRILS OF WATER SLITHER LIKE SNAKES, SEEKING REFUGE IN THE GROUND.
BUT EVEN IN THE BOWELS OF THE EARTH, THEY NEVER CEASE TO CRAWL.
THE RAIN IS NOT YET SATIATED.
THE AME HO HAKO RITUAL WILL TAKE PLACE ONE LAST TIME. IT IS SHINNOSUKE'S TURN.
HE ALREADY KNOWS WHAT THE RAIN WILL WHISPER, THOUGH HE DESPERATELY HOPES KAIDA LIED TO HIM.
FOR HE WILL STOP AT NOTHING TO FREE MIKIKO.
KONDO, EIJI, GUON... CAN YOU EVER FORGIVE ME?


AT THE END OF A LONG, TORTUROUS WAIT, THE AME NO HAKO'S HORRIFIC REQUEST IS FINALLY REVEALED.

SHINNOSUKE GATHERS IN HIS TREMBLING HAND THE ONLY REAL LINK TO HIS PAST.
HE CAN NOW FINALLY OPEN THE RED DOOR.

BUT TO SEE MIKIKO AGAIN...HE WILL HAVE TO KILL HER.

THE RAIN HAS SPOKEN WITH SICK, TWISTED IRONY.
AN ENIGMA, TO WHICH SHINNOSUKE'S LOGIC CAN FIND NO ANSWER.

KAIDA JUST WANTS HIS HEART, AND SHE KNOWS THAT ONLY THE MASK OF FUDO CAN SHOW HIM THE PATH HE MUST TAKE.

HOGEN COULD NEVER GO AGAINST THE MASK.

SO BE IT, KAIDA. I WILL OPEN THE RED DOOR. BUT SINCE THE RAIN REQUIRES ITS WEIGHT IN BLOOD...

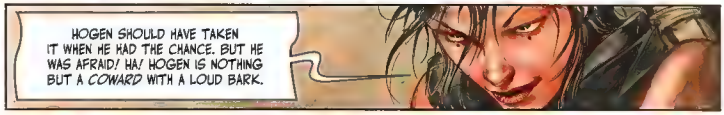
...IT WILL BE HOGEN'S BLOOD THAT IS SHED.

HAI! SHINNOSUKE IS ON HIS WAY.
DON'T WORRY, THE PLAN WORKED.
KAIDA TOOK THE MASK, YES! RIGHT OUT FROM UNDER HOGEN'S NOSE.
YOU STUPID LITTLE SAVAGE! DID YOU THINK I WOULDN'T NOTICE?
MASTER HOGEN...
YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A SNAKE! WHERE'S THE MASK?! TELL ME WHAT YOU'RE SCHEMING, YOU TRAITOR!
AGH!
KAIDA...WAS NEVER... LOYAL TO YOU. KAIDA... *GH*...ONLY OBEYS...THE *GLLL*...PROPHECY.
WHAT ARE YOU SAYING?! WHAT PROPHECY? TELL ME, OR I'LL SQUASH YOU LIKE A BUG!
GHK... KILLING KAIDA... IS POINTLESS... KAIDA ALREADY... *GHK*...MADE THE RAIN SPEAK TO SHINNOSUKE.
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?! YOU WHORE! WHAT DID YOU PUT IN SHINNOSUKE'S AME NO HAKO?
JUST HIS... *COUGH*... HIS DESTINY... *COUGH*

HOGEN!!

COUGH LOOKS LIKE MASTER HOGEN... IS FINALLY...GOING TO SEE FUDO'S FIRE...UP CLOSE!
SHINNOSUKE CAN'T BE THE CHOSEN ONE. IT'S UNACCEPTABLE!

I'VE WAITED FOR THE MASK OF FUDO-MYO FOR MANY LONG YEARS. I, ALONE, AM WORTHY OF ITS POWER!


HOGEN SHOULD HAVE TAKEN IT WHEN HE HAD THE CHANCE. BUT HE WAS AFRAID! HA! HOGEN IS NOTHING BUT A COWARD WITH A LOUD BARK.

SHUT YOUR MOUTH, YOU SNAKE! THIS ISN'T OVER YET. THIS TIME, I'M GOING TO RIP THE MASK OFF THAT FILTHY HININ MYSELF!

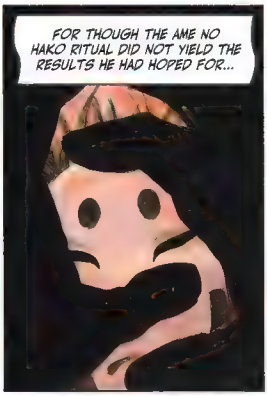
KIYAAA!

HAAAA

HOGEN WOULD HAVE LIKED TO SCREAM HIS HATRED FOR SHINNOSUKE, BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN IN VAIN.

FOR DARKNESS STARED AT HIM FROM BEYOND THE SLITS: IT WAS NOT SHINNOSUKE BEHIND THE MASK.

WHEN THE VOID TOOK HOGEN INTO ITS DEADLY EMBRACE, ALL HE FELT WAS PRIDE.


FOR THOUGH THE AME NO HAKO RITUAL DID NOT YIELD THE RESULTS HE HAD HOPED FOR...

... THE RAIN HAD AWAKENED THE FLAME.
KRAAK

SHINNOSUKE!

WHAT HAVE I TURNED INTO, KAIDA? THESE WOUNDS SHOULD HAVE KILLED ME.
SHINNOSUKE HAS BEGUN WALKING THE PATH OF FIRE. SUCH IS HIS DESTINY. KAIDA WILL TEND TO HIS WOUNDS. SHE HAS ALWAYS BEEN HERE TO HELP HIM.

I DON'T WANT TO WALK ANY PATH! I NEVER WANTED ANY OF THIS!

I JUST WANT TO FIND MIKIKO.

KRRR-AAK

AMATERASU-OMIKAMI, PLEASE, I BEG YOU, LET MIKIKO BE ALIVE.

SHINNOSUKE... IS THAT YOU? YOU... YOU'VE COME TO SAVE ME!

COME CLOSER, SON... COME AND EMBRACE YOUR MOTHER. I'M SO PROUD OF YOU.
I GIVE THANKS TO HIRUKO FOR HEARING THE PRAYERS OF NOBU, HIS LOYAL AND ONLY SERVANT.
THE PROTECTOR OF THE IMMOVABLE FIRE HAS COME TO SAVE ME! HOGEN DIDN'T KNOW ANYTHING, I ALONE KNEW THE TRUTH! HIRUKO'S PROPHECY WAS REAL! MY SON PROVES THAT IT'S REAL!
FUDO WILL OPEN HIS DOORS TO THE LAST PRIESTESS OF THE GOD HIRUKO. THE LIBERATOR SHALL ARRIVE, PROTECTED BY THE IMMOVABLE FIRE!
I...AM THE LIBERATOR!
KILL ME, KAIDA, I BEG YOU. THROW MY SOUL TO THE SHINIGAMI SO THEY MAY FEED ON IT... I WANT IT RIPPED TO SHREDS!
NO... SHINNOSUKE CANNOT ASK FOR THAT.
ESPECIALLY NOW THAT SHINNOSUKE HAS BEGUN WALKING AMONG THE SHINIGAMI.
AT FIRST, THE MURMOR WAS FAINT, BUT IT QUICKLY GREW LOUDER: THE NEW BROTHERS BEGAN TO ASK FOR THEIR LEADER.
FUDO
FUDO
FUDO
FUDO
FUDO
FUDO
FUDO
FUDO

THEIR CHANTS ECHOED AGAINST THE WALLS OF THE GREAT CAVE, WHILE THEIR RAISED ARMS TORE AT THE LAST SHREDS OF SHINNOSUKE'S SOUL.
THE DOKUTSU DOJO HAD A NEW MASTER.
FUDŌ
FUDŌ
FUDŌ
FUDŌ
FUDŌ
THE ECHO OF THAT CLAMOR REMAINS ALIVE IN HIS MEMORY.
EVERY DAY, EVERY MONTH, EVERY YEAR, THOSE VOICES REMIND HIM OF THE MOMENT HE SIGNED THEIR PACT...
BUT THOUGH THEY SURROUND HIM, HE HAS UNDERSTOOD FOR SOME TIME NOW...
... THAT HE HAS ALWAYS BEEN ALONE.

SPRING, YEAR 285 OF THE FUJIWARA BAKUFU - THE SHIRANUI ERA. THE NUPTIALS OF SHOGUN TOTEKU FUJIWARA ARE IMMINENT. THRONGS OF PEOPLE FILL THE STREETS, DANCING ANCIENT DANCES TO EXHAUSTION.
PRAYERS AND WISHES RISE UP TOWARDS THE HEAVENLY KAMI.
BRRROOUUN
THE OFFENDED SKY RESPONDS WITH A SUDDEN SPRING SHOWER.
DAMNED RAIN! THAT'S THE LAST THING WE NEEDED TODAY.
HEY, YOU! COME AND TAKE COVER, OR YOUR PAPER MASKS WILL BE RUINED!

WHEW... THANK YOU. MY POOR OLD BONES AREN'T WHAT THEY USED TO BE.
WE ALL HATE THIS ROTTEN WEATHER, FRIEND. NOBODY WAS EXPECTING THIS!
IT REALLY LOOKS LIKE THE HEAVENLY KAMI AREN'T SMILING FAVORABLY UPON THE SHOGUN'S NUPTIALS.
YOU'RE RIGHT. NOT TO MENTION, THE SHOGUN'S DOCTOR DIED.
WHOA! WHO TOLD YOU THAT?
IT'S JUST A RUMOR, BUT I HEARD KAIZEN MOREBITO WAS FOUND WITH HIS THROAT RIPPED OUT.
I HEARD ONE OF THE EMPEROR'S SHINOBIS MIGHT HAVE DONE IT.
ARGH, ENOUGH CHITCHAT. DRINK WITH US, MY FRIEND. A LITTLE SAKE WILL WARM YOU RIGHT UP.
I KNEW IT WOULD COME TO THIS. I'VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU.

TO BE CONTINUED IN BOOK 2.